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Local Participation and Participatory Institutions in Hungary

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Introduction

The concern about declining participation is quite widespread in contemporary political discourse. As a reaction, many propositions have recently been formulated in political studies to improve the quantity and quality of political participation. New institutions have been proposed to decrease citizens' costs or increase the benefits of participation. These proposed political reforms range from electronic democracy to deliberative polls.

The discourse on the problem of participation receives much less attention in Central and Eastern Europe. That might be the explanation for the scarcity of literature on the subject. Moreover, this literature, at least in Hungary, focuses mostly on turnout rates and electoral mobilization. Not only is research on initiatives of new, participatory institutions lacking, but so is an evaluation of the present status of affairs. Are the existing participatory institutions actually used? Does the existing evidence encourage the development of new, deliberative or participative institutions? Which institutions are the most appropriate for strengthening political participation? Do direct democracy institutions induce political participation in Central and Eastern Europe?

This paper aims to contribute to the research on the effect of participatory institutions on citizens' participation. It examines local participatory institutions in Hungary and addresses the participation generated by these institutions. After an introduction into the local government system in Hungary, the paper reviews four existing institutions, which are supposed to stimulate direct participation of citizens. First, turnout at local elections and other forms of electoral participation will be discussed briefly. The second section addresses the actual use of local referendum, an often proposed institution of direct democracy. The third question raised here is to what degree the decision-making of local governments is inclusive. Finally, the democratic argument for small local governments, i.e. the claim that the direct participation of local citizens in public life is higher in small communities, is examined.

The Local Government System in Hungary

The present system of Hungarian local government was established in two subsequent waves of constitutional legislation in 1990 and 1994. Act No. LXV of 1990 and Act No. LXIII of 1994 recognized the rights of municipalities to self-government and transformed the whole system of public administration from the centrally directed local councils of the Communist times to autonomous, democratically elected municipal self-governments. The new system followed the principles of the European Charter of Local Self-Governments of the Council of Europe and the historical traditions of Hungarian public administration.

Within the framework of local governments, consecutive pieces of legislation established a two-tier system - based on historical traditions - where municipalities (villages, towns/cities) represent the basic units of the system, while counties form the middle tier. The requirements of EU structural funds prompted the creation of seven statistical regions, which have no organizational form such as elected or appointed leaders or administrative staff.

Municipal governments have mandatory and optional responsibilities in service provision, as enumerated in the Act on Local Government and determined by Parliament. Mandatory responsibilities can be further divided into two categories: basic tasks, mandatory for every settlement in Hungary regardless of the size of the municipality and its population, and functions delegated as mandatory for larger settlements by legislation. Functions, such as the maintenance of water supply, general education, basic health and welfare services, public lighting, local public roads, cemeteries and the protection of minorities, belong to the first category. Legally delegated mandatory functions for larger settlements with greater capabilities are identified as the maintenance of fire brigades, technical rescue service and a wider range of social welfare services. It is the duty of Parliament to provide normative financial means necessary for maintaining these mandatory functions of local governments.

The capital, which is nine times larger than the second largest city, has special legal status with its own two-tier local government system. This system consists of the self-government of Budapest and the local governments of the 23 districts of the capital. In this system, the district governments fulfill the role and functions of municipal governments independently from the capital municipal government. At the same time, the government of Budapest fulfills the roles and tasks of a municipal government which pertain to more than one district or the whole city as well as the tasks related to the special role of Budapest in the country. In the rest of this paper, district governments are treated in the same way as other, 'ordinary' municipalities.

Municipalities of less than 10,000 inhabitants directly vote on candidates on a common list ("short ticket"). Voters can select as many candidates as there are places in the representative body. This number ranges from three (below 100 inhabitants) to thirteen (between 5,000 and 10,000 inhabitants). Municipalities of more than 10,000 inhabitants have a mixed electoral system. Approximately 60 percent of representatives are elected in individual electoral districts. The representatives in constituencies are elected by simple majority. To make representation more proportional, the votes of the candidates who are on party lists and were unsuccessful in their individual district are summed up and about 40 percent of the places are distributed among the lists. Representatives elected from the list represent the whole city, not a smaller territory. Mayors are elected directly at the same time as representatives. The representative body (council) is composed of the representatives and the mayor.

The most important actors of local decision-making consist of the council of representatives, the committees, the mayor and the chief administration officer (CAO) or notary. Basic rights and powers reside with the body of representatives. It may delegate competence to the committees, the mayor, local minority self-governments, and district governments. It also establishes and organizes the procedures of operation through decrees.

The mayor represents the body of representatives and exercises authority with its assistance. He or she is also responsible for local policy implementation and performs local and state administrative tasks. The mayor exercises employer' s rights over the vice mayor, the CAO, and heads of local governments institutions. The CAO is appointed by the body of representatives via open competition. The CAO manages the day to day affairs of the office of the local government and exercises employer' s rights over civil servants employed in the office.

A special Hungarian institution is minority self-government. Minorities in Hungary live dispersed in the country, so the system of minority local representation cannot be based on territorial units. Ethnic and national minority groups have the right to form minority self-governments through a special electoral procedure. Municipal councils must obtain the consent of minority self-governments for decisions that affect interests in minority education, culture, etc. The law on minority self-government recognizes the right of individuals to choose identities and, therefore, the choice of identity is absolutely free and confidential. Candidates can run and voters can vote in minority elections without needing to prove membership in the ethnic or national minority that they represent and vote for.

Electoral Participation

One form of local citizen participation is involvement in the local electoral process. From an institutional point of view, local elections work well in Hungary. Voters perfectly understand the mechanism of election and electoral frauds are as rare as in Western Europe.

Turnout at local elections is not particularly high, though slowly increasing. While only 40 percent voted in 1990, more than half of the total electorate turned out in 2002. Consequently, the electoral reform in 1994 (directly elected mayors plus one-round elections) did not significantly increase turnout. The turnout is higher in small villages (where voters know candidates personally and local public life is simple) and in Budapest (where both media exposure and electoral competition are high and thus local public life is simplified by parties). When personal income is included in the analysis on the level of the individual voter, however, the effect of the size of a municipality disappears. Voters with higher income turn out at parliamentary elections, while people with lower income vote locally. The size of municipality has no significant effect on turnout and participation is not higher in small communities. (Hajnal 2000)

Turnout at Local and Parliamentary Elections in Hungary (1990-2002)

Type of Election	1990	1994	1998	2002
Parliamentary (1st round)	65.1%	68.9%	57.0%	70.5%
Local government (1st round in 1990)	40.2%	43.4%	45.7%	51,0%

Source: www.valasztas.hu

In general, there is competition for local government positions. In some villages, however, it is difficult to recruit enough candidates, and elections have been canceled in a few places in every local election. While a little more than two candidates compete for a single position in municipalities with 10,000 or less inhabitants, this ratio is more than seven in larger local governments (Soós-Kálmán 2002:90). In addition to municipality size, the level of socio-economic development, the density of civil organizations, and the strength of political parties also have significant effects on the number of candidates for mayoral and representative offices. In sum, larger, wealthier and more organized societies tend to generate higher competition at local elections.

Local elections generate much interest among the voters, though that varies from municipality to municipality. This has been on the increase since the establishment of the local government system, which shows that the new institution has been become more and more embedded within the socio-political structure.

Local Referenda

According to the Hungarian Constitution, local self-government is the local citizens legal due. “Eligible voters exercise the right to local government through the representative body that they elect and by way of local referendum. (44. § 1)” In the Constitution, local referendum is treated on par with indirect representation. From a legal-constitutional point of view, local referendum is as legitimate an institution in Hungary as the local elections in which the mayor and council of the local government are directly elected.

The Local Government Act contributes a full chapter to local referenda and initiatives. It is compulsory to call a local referendum in the case of territorial changes: unification of local governments or separation of a part of a local government. In these referenda, only those citizens living in the affected area are entitled to vote. Moreover, the representative body (municipal council) of the local government is entitled to call a compulsory local referendum at any time. The council may hold a local referendum to reinforce one of its previously made decision or to ask any kind of questions before a decision within the jurisdiction of local governments. Nevertheless, it is legally prohibited to hold local referendum on budgetary questions, local taxes, the rules of the operation of the representative body, and the dissolution of the representative body.

It is relatively easy to officially initiate a local referendum. One quarter of the local council, a committee of the council, or the leaders of an NGO all can submit a proposition to the mayor. However, the council is not obliged to actually call a local referendum in these instances. It is compulsory to hold a referendum if enough citizens petition for one. The proportion of citizens, required by the law, is between ten and twenty-five percent. The actual threshold is set by the local governments themselves. Local councils must adopt a decree on local referenda, in which they specify the proportion of citizens needed for holding an obligatory referendum. This local decree on referenda also sets the threshold for popular initiatives, which must be within five and ten percent. The decree must also specify the local rules for the arrangements of local referenda (e.g. the way in which signatures must be collected).

As one might guess, local governments like to set a high threshold in these decrees. Although there is no survey on the actual percentages adopted by councils, a quick overview shows that ten of the eleven randomly surveyed municipalities of different size set the limit high: either 25 percent (six local governments) or 20 percent (four local governments). Only one of them has opted for the lowest possible limit, i.e. 10 percent). Local representatives seem more generous concerning the non-binding popular initiatives: more than half (six municipalities) set the threshold at 5 percent, which is the legally possible lowest proportion.

The result of a local referendum is valid if more than half of the entitled citizens turn out and a majority of the actual voters vote in the same way. In villages with less than 500 inhabitants, a village meeting may replace a local referendum provided that half of the villagers participate in the meeting. The council is obliged to respect the results of local referenda. If the referendum fails, the council can decide on its own and no referendum can be held on the same question within a period of one year.

A popular initiative may propose the debate of any public issue in the jurisdiction of local governments. The council is required to discuss the question, but has no further obligations.

In sum, initiating a local referendum is not easy, but far from being impossible in Hungary.

The legal status of local referenda is high and the rules of their organization is well defined. The proportion of citizens who can call an obligatory referendum is not prohibitively high if the issue is a concern of many. Since an NGO may also propose a referendum to the council, the cost of getting publicity and further support is low.

Still, the actual use of the institution of local referendum is low. Eight to nineteenth local referenda were initiated annually in more than 3,200 municipalities between 1999 and 2002. (The Hungarian bureaucracy is not able to produce aggregate data for prior periods.) In the first three months of this year, only one local referendum has taken place. The small number of referenda suggests that the popularity of the local referendum is very limited in Hungary.

Referenda are used in two exceptional cases only. The law requires referendum for territorial changes (secession from, or accession to, a municipality or an alteration of county borders); therefore this is the subject of voting in some municipalities every year. Twenty-three (or 41 percent) of the total fifty-six referenda in 1999-2002 dealt with territorial changes. Deducting the number of compulsory referenda on territorial issues, one will find only one year (2000) when more than ten non-compulsory, citizen-initiated local referenda were held.

The other category is the strong conflict over big projects. Unwanted facilities (toxic waste dumps, shopping malls, quarries, etc.) form one group in this category (24 referenda or 43 percent). The other group of project referenda is fairly mixed, including the closing of schools to the selling of community property. Nine referenda (or 16 percent) belong to this group.

Initiatives of local referenda in Hungary (1999-2002)

	<i>1999</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>2001</i>	<i>2002</i>
Territorial change: Separation	8	4	7	4
Projects: Unwanted facilities	7	10	3	4
Projects: Other	2	5	2	0
Total	17	19	12	8

Source: www.valasztas.hu

Since 50 percent of local voters must turn out to make the referendum legally binding, many of the initiatives fail due to a lack of interest. For example, only seven (or 37 percent!) and nine (75 percent) of all referenda were successfully implemented in 2000 and 2001, respectively. The ratio of failures is higher among the unwanted facilities group. That refers to the weakness of single-issue protest groups to mobilize local citizens.

Longitudinally, no trend can be observed. Even if data are not available from the 1990s, the low annual number of local referenda does not indicate a post-communist learning process.

In general, one can draw the conclusion that this important element of the local government reform of 1990, which aimed at direct democracy, is largely underused in Hungary.

Why is the institution of local referendum, with a solid legal-constitutional basis and high political potential, so neglected? There has been no research conducted on this problem. (Actually, that might also be an indicator of the status of the institution.) Speculatively, three potential causes (institutional, cultural, and societal) can be listed:

1. An obvious institutional barrier is the threshold set by local governments. It is not easy to mobilize 20-25 percent of the local society for a petition, and again mobilize half of them to

turn out. In a country where the highest turnout at local elections was 51 percent, those thresholds seem very high.

That institutional explanation can at best be partial, as lower thresholds do not seem to induce more frequent use of local referenda and there are examples of successful initiatives in high-threshold municipalities. (For instance, the threshold is twenty percent in the municipality where the only referendum has happened this year.) Another problem with this simple explanation is that country-level referenda are not held more frequently: there was one held on the direct election of the president (failed) and another one on NATO membership (succeeded). The threshold of a country-level referendum is only 200,000 signatures (two percent of the total population) and is effective if twenty-five percent of the eligible voters vote in the same way (that is why the NATO referendum was effective, though only 49 percent turned out).

2. In terms of political culture, local referendum has no tradition in Hungary. The institution was created in 1990. Since few cases have since crossed over the stimulus threshold of media, the awareness of the institution is limited among Hungarian citizens. It is not a part of people's mental toolkit of claim-enforcement.

3. A societal hypothesis for the underused nature of referendum on both national and local level is the low organization of civil society in Hungary (like in other post-communist countries). The Communist regime systematically destroyed the spontaneous horizontal organization of the society. The dense network of Catholic, Socialist and other associations were officially regarded as a potential danger for the building of Real Socialism. In addition to a deep economic crisis, democracy inherited a weak society, largely characterized by amoral familism.

Although much has happened since the fall of Communism, the density of civil society organizations is comparatively low in Hungary: 4.7 non-profit organizations per 1000 inhabitants. Their territorial distribution is largely skewed. Almost one third of non-profit organizations are located in Budapest (where 18 percent of the population live), while there are no such organizations in one sixth of the local governments. Similarly, there are no media outlets in 57 percent of the Hungarian municipalities. (Soós-Kálmán 2002: 46, 82) The societal potential for political participation is limited by the level of social participation.

A related problem is the lack of local counter-elites. First, representative institutions are strong and flexible to be able to coop the emerging new leaders and movements. Second, the new democratic political institutions, especially parties, absorbed the leaders available in civil society organizations at the end of the eighties and in the beginning of the nineties. Third, the number of skilled or potential leaders in small villages is limited by the small size of the local government. The social and political societies almost fully overlap each other in smaller communities. Without leaders, the potential for political action is small.

Another related problem is the dependence of local society on local government resources. Administrative leaders of local governments reported in a survey conducted by the Tocqueville Research Center that eighty percent of the civil organizations received some financial or in-kind support from the local government.

For lack of research, the above-mentioned hypotheses can only be regarded as untested research proposals. What is certain is that the institution of local referendum is largely underused in Hungary and the causes of this situation have yet to be uncovered.

Inviting Citizens in Local Governance

While local governments are not participatory institutions per se, the Local Government Act, adopted in 1990, treated the inclusion of local citizens as the crucial duty of local governments. In fact, the Hungarian name of local governments, “önkormányzat” means “self-government”: government by the people. Hungarian local governments are freely elected. Nonetheless, the local democracy dreamed of by the designers of the administrative system requires the further inclusion of citizens into the decision-making process between elections. This chapter of the paper addresses the question as to what degree local governments operate as participatory institutions.

Legally speaking, the only requirement set by the Local Government Act is that local governments must hold one public hearing per year. There are no rules for the organization of public hearings, e.g. their deliberative or informative nature or the way how they are advertised to the citizenry. Formally, public hearings are ordinary meetings of the local representative body, in which any citizen can contribute to the discussion. Local governments are naturally free to hold as many public hearings or forums as they wish.

Administrative leaders, interviewed in the survey carried out by the Tocqueville Research Center in 2001, reported the actual number of forums and public hearings held by local government in 2000. Two percent of local governments did not fulfill even the minimum legal requirement. Two-thirds of municipalities held the minimum number of public hearings, i.e. one, while one in three local governments had more than one forum or public hearing.

There is significant positive association between the number of forums held by local government and the level of socio-economic development of a municipality. A similar, but negative relationship can be found between the number of forums and the position of the municipality on the West-East axis. In other words, local leaders in municipalities of similar size are more likely to engage their citizenry in settlements that are more developed and are closer to the country's Western border.

The number of forums and public hearings is also low in comparative terms. While the average number of meetings is only 1.6 in Hungary, Polish or Romanian municipalities held an average of 15 and 12 forums, respectively, in 2000 (Local Government Survey 2001).

My participatory observation and interviews with local leaders do not indicate that forums and public hearings held by local governments would realize the aspirations of participatory democracy proponents. The agenda of the meeting is set by the mayor or the council, which allows representatives to avoid uneasy questions. The advertisement of forums and public hearings are limited to some billboards or an ad in the monthly newsletter of the local government. As a result, few people attend. The style of these meetings is rarely deliberative. In most instances, local leaders play the major role by giving information on the state of affairs and responding to related questions. In some cases, the discussion is lively, but participants are not constructive and do not try to convince each other. Local governments never appoint a neutral, but skilled convener. Many representatives cynically view forums and public hearings as safety valves through which the most annoying citizens can release their steam.

Participation in local political life can be initiated by actors other than the local government. The Local Government Survey of the Tocqueville Research Center collected information

about five types of local collective political activities in the year 2000. Unfortunately due to resource limitations a citizen survey could not be carried out parallel with our survey of notaries in municipalities, thus we cannot add the views of citizens to these data.

Local Political Activities in Hungary (2000)

	% of surveyed municipalities	Average number of activity per municipality
Public demonstrations	3.0%	0.05
Petitions	13.0%	0.16
Requesting meetings	24.0%	1.17
Challenging local government decisions	5.0%	1.00
Civil society proposals	37.0%	1.63

Source: Local Government Survey 2001

The submission of proposals by civic organizations took place in the highest proportion of municipalities, and requests for meetings was the second most widespread tool used. Understandably, more conflicting actions such as demonstrations, petitions, and challenging decisions at courts were not generally employed. Although the frequency of court cases ranks third, such situations occurred in only 5% of the municipalities surveyed.

In almost half (49%) of the Hungarian municipalities, none of the above presented actions took place in 2000. It is not surprising that the number of initiatives to influence local government decisions is largely determined by municipality size.

In other words, citizens participate much more actively in the politics of larger cities. The differences are quite substantial, with participation about 10 times more frequent in the larger cities than in the smaller ones – obviously this is linked to the complexity of issues as well. The second most important predictor of the intensity of local collective actions is the density of civil organizations. In all population categories, citizens of more civic municipalities tend to participate more in local politics. The third significant factor is the level of socio-economic development. People in richer municipalities are more likely to participate collectively in local political life.

The Local Government Survey shows that wherever such participatory actions took place, generally speaking, individual citizens were the most active in initiating them; next in order came civil society organizations; in last place were political parties.

In sum, local governments are not participatory institutions. Decision-making is rather exclusive than inclusive in Hungarian municipalities. It is clear from multivariate analysis that the density of civil society organizations and the extent of economic development increase the chances of participation and encourage (or press) leaders to hold more public meetings on local problems. The actual use of institutions depends on the social environment in which they exist.

Is Small Really Beautiful?

Hungary has a highly fragmented local government system. As a compensation to the forced amalgamations of the Communist period, each local community is entitled to form a local government. The consequent application of this principle led to a highly (though not exceptional in Europe) fragmented local government system. Each locality became an independent, autonomous local government and the number of local units increased from less than 1,600 to more than 3,100. The average local government has a little more than 3,200 inhabitants and more than half of the local governments have a population of less than 1,000 (though they form only 7.7 percent of the country's population). Only 4.4 percent of the municipalities have more than 10,000 inhabitants, where 59 percent of the Hungarian population live. The widespread recognition of the autonomy principle can be illustrated by the fact that the number of local governments is still increasing. The Parliament has authorized the secession of more than 80 small communities since 1990, even if these new local governments are often very small (the smallest has only 148 inhabitants) and the motivation for the secessions usually economic. For example, a recently seceded settlement formed only one fifth of the population of a town they used to belong to but produced half of its municipal tax base before separation.

In addition to the efforts to make democracy different from the previous Communist period, two reasons motivated the designers of the Constitution and the Local Government Act to make local autonomy possible for even the smallest communities. The first reason was based on the belief that a stable local government system needs legitimate local units with widely recognized boundaries. This case for small municipalities proved very solid. However, the second reason is more the topic of this paper.

The other consideration was a presupposed relationship between the size of municipalities and the level of democracy. It was assumed that there is more (direct) democracy in small communities. The smaller the community is, the argument goes, the better representatives know citizens' needs and wants and the more citizens can keep representatives accountable. This hidden assumption probably came from a belief in community democracy in small places as opposed to party democracy in larger municipalities.

In terms of participation, this thinking presupposes more participation as well as more deliberation in smaller municipalities. Treating the hidden assumption as an empirical research question, one can derive three hypotheses to test the validity of the "small is beautiful" thesis. The first relates to the turnout at local elections. Electoral participation is influenced by many factors, as people have a wide range of motivations for turning out. Still, turnout rate as an indicator of participation has the advantage to be easy to measure, and compare. The hypothesis of community democracy leads to a prediction of a higher turnout rate in small municipalities than in large ones.

Second, small communities are presupposed to make decisions in a more participatory way. Since issues are less complex and more understandable for ordinary people, and the number of participants does not exceed the natural limit of personal deliberation, the hypothesis is that decisions are made through direct participation of citizens more frequently in small communities than in large ones.

Third, it may be argued that democratic control of local leaders is exercised in small communities by direct participation and social pressure on local politicians. The sheer size of

local society determines the degree of social proximity between citizens and leaders. In small communities, the proximity is high, since leaders can be approached easily and the resulting interpersonal accountability leads to higher responsiveness. From the viewpoint of ordinary people, the benefits of participation is high (their claims are asserted), while its cost is low (leaders live among them). As citizens' political power is increased, their feeling of efficacy is predicted to be higher. Thus, citizens in small communities are hypothesized to have more personal contacts with their leaders and a higher feeling of personal efficacy than in large municipalities.

The first hypothesis predicts a higher turnout in small communities than in large ones. Data support this hypothesis. As the following table demonstrates, the turnout at local elections are higher in small and very small local governments. This is a longitudinal, systematic difference, which is statistically significant for each election year.

Turnout at Parliamentary and Local Elections in Hungary (1990-1998)

	<i>Less than 2,000</i>	<i>2,000- 10,000</i>	<i>More than 10,000</i>	<i>Budapest</i>
Share in population	17.1%	23.9%	40.9%	18.0%
Share in municipalities	75.9%	19.8	4.4%	0.03%
Turnout at Local Election				
1990	55.5%	47.9%	31.1%	37.4%
1994	62.0%	49.0%	34.9%	39.3%
1998	60.9%	48.0%	39.3%	43.7%
Turnout at Parliamentary Elections				
1990	64.0%	60.0%	65.6%	71.2%
1994	67.0%	64.1%	70.0%	73.5%
1998	55.1%	51.1%	58.2%	63.6%

Source: www.valasztas.hu

Nevertheless, the table also shows that turnout at parliamentary elections is also higher in small places than in towns or cities. Actually, turnout at country-level elections tends to be higher than at local elections. The size of local society certainly influences electoral participation, but institutions may not matter much. Based on this evidence, one can argue that citizens in small villages would turn out to a higher degree even if their localities belonged to a larger local government unit. It is unclear if legal-administrative institutions contribute to turnout rates at all.

Although it is very rare that the number of candidates is lower than the available places (e.g., only 5 places remained unoccupied from the available 21,432 in 1998), the candidate/representative ratio was quite low in many small villages. The competition is much stronger in towns and cities where 7.4 candidates stood for the representation of an average electoral district in 1998. The number of candidates running for mayoralty is not high (2.6) at country level but there is a real competition in bigger municipalities. These data do not support the higher participation hypothesis either.

The second test of the positive effect of small local government institutions on direct, participatory democracy is the frequency of collective, community-level decision-making. A strong case for the institutionalization of small local democracies would be a large

involvement of villagers in local public life through the inclusive decision-making of local governments.

The hypothesis of direct democracy in small communities predicts frequent meetings with citizens in small places and more frequent meetings than in larger municipalities. This claim can be tested by a question posed by a survey conducted by the Tocqueville Research Center with administrative leaders. The question asked about the number of public hearings and forums. In reality, municipalities with 5,000 or less inhabitants had 1.4 meetings on average in 2000. This frequency is only a little higher than what is legally required. There is no information to what degree those meetings were deliberative and consultative and not simply a unilateral information-dissemination of leaders. This additional research finding is not needed, since the low number of public hearings and forums clearly indicate that decision-making in small local governments is not based on face-to-face public discussions of citizens.

What is more, larger local governments held 2.4 public hearings and meetings on average. Contrary to the expectations, collective deliberation is *less* frequent in small communities: they do not hold more meetings than large municipalities. These findings do not support the greater existence of direct democracy in small, face-to-face communities at all. Representative democracy seems dominant in small places too.

One may argue that formal meetings are not necessary if people often meet each other and their leaders. In this potential argument, public opinion is formed by an infinite series of face-to-face discussions, leading to an informal decision. This is formalized by leaders, who take part in the process and are socially pressed to follow the 'general will'.

Therefore, the third test relates to the contacts between leaders and citizens. Higher social pressure and more direct democracy may be indicated by frequent face-to-face contacts between local representatives and ordinary citizens. The sheer number of contacts is expected to be high and relatively higher than in larger municipalities where representatives have more indirect, institutionalized and formalized contacts with their electorate.

The hypothesis of informal pressure on, and deliberation with, leaders is unsupported by data. The question in the survey with local representatives was as follows: 'In an average month, how many local citizens contact you as their representative, either during office hours or at some other time?' Representatives in municipalities with 5,000 or less inhabitants meet 10.6 citizens per month on average. This number is not really impressive. What is more, representatives in larger municipalities meet more voters (14.2).

Number of voters initiating contacts with local representatives

<i>Population categories</i>	<i>0-1000</i>	<i>1000-1999</i>	<i>2000-4999</i>	<i>5000-9999</i>	<i>10000-49999</i>	<i>50000+</i>	<i>Country</i>
Number of contacts	10,1	11,6	10,8	16,0	13,3	15,2	12,2

Source: Local Representative Survey 2001 (www.t-rc.org)

Another set of questions aimed to reveal how representatives form their opinions. ('Before forming a final opinion on issues of local government, you obviously listen to the opinion of others. Now, how influential is the opinion of the following people on the formation of your opinion?') One may expect that ordinary citizens have an exceptionally high influence on local representatives' opinion in small places, and that this effect is higher than in larger municipalities where organizations like parties and media indirectly channel public opinion.

As the following table shows, local representatives in small municipalities evaluated the influence of ordinary citizens as 5.09 on a 7-point scale (with seven indicating the greatest influence). This number is high, higher than the effect of the mayor (4.03) or the head of the administration (3.99) on opinion formation. Nonetheless, the perceived influence of individual voters is even higher in large municipalities (5.42). If this is not simply a social desirability effect, the surprising conclusion is that councilors and mayors in small municipalities are less responsive to local citizens' needs than in large local governments. One can conclude that personal accountability is much weaker in small municipalities, and that such communities have a greater tendency toward elitist top-down governance.

Citizens' influence on the opinion formation of local representatives (means)

	Mayors	Councilors	All representatives
Less than 5000 inhabitants	5.41 (N=105)	5.05 (N=844)	5.09 (N=949)
More than 5000 inhabitants	5.41 (N=37)	5.43 (N=710)	5.42 (N=747)
Hungary	5.41 (N=142)	5.22 (N=1554)	5.24 (N=1696)

Source: Local Representative Survey 2001 (www.t-rc.org)

What these numbers actually demonstrate is at best the dominance of representative democracy, well-functioning in small municipalities too. At worst they indicate an inward-looking, elitist and technocratic political culture of local politicians in all municipalities. Without further research, not even the validity of the above-mentioned data can be evaluated, to say nothing of the causes of the phenomenon. Further qualitative research should examine the causal mechanisms and ways of participatory decision-making in small municipalities, and citizen surveys should then generalize the qualitative findings.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the actual functioning of four local institutions with (at least potentially) a participatory character. The growing turnout rate and the high awareness on local elections indicates that this institution is increasingly used by citizens to influence the public life of their community. In sharp contrast, local referendum seems an almost unused institution: few referenda are initiated and most of them are required by the law. Its actual use does not live up to its high legal status. Local government efforts at inclusive decision-making and public consultancy are limited and infrequently exceed the extent that is legally required. Public meetings are rarely of a deliberative nature. In terms of the effect of municipality size on participation, the theses of Dahl and Tufte (1973), who argue that large units offer more opportunities for participation, is more supported than, e.g., Sharpe (1970), who claims that small communities generate more political participation.

The review of participatory institutions in Hungary leads to the conclusion that they are greatly underused. Institutional reforms may be able to enhance the opportunities for local referendum by decreasing the threshold of the initiation. The other possible way to strengthen the participatory nature of these institutions is to introduce compulsory consultations and deliberations in local governments, including the small ones. Nonetheless, such institutional reforms are highly unlikely. On one hand, the present government coalition is strongly against any kind of 'politics on the street'. On the other hand, top-down reforms would run against the principle of local autonomy, which is the central, legitimating value of the local government system.

The introduction of new participatory institutions is unlikely till the existing ones are unused. Political reforms to encourage participation in the existing institutions, in turn, are unlikely till real societal needs are shown. Multivariate analyses of survey data indicate that participation is higher where the web of civil society (NGOs, media and parties) is denser. Thus, the major reason for the lack of participation is the fact that local societies are weakly organized. There are few movements that press the central or local governments to take participatory institutions into account. The existing institutions will not bring citizens back in till the horizontal societal organization is weak.

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